

Some 'age of innocence'

While Jimmy Carter, Sam Nunn, and Colin Powell were scurrying about in Port-au-Prince trying to avoid a massive invasion of Haiti due to begin in hours, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and his deputy, Strobe Talbott, ducked out of the White House to see a movie, Robert Redford's "Quiz Show."

Now you might not realize this, but Robert Redford — not the aging pretty-boy actor but the concerned



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film director — sees himself as one of the country's heavy thinkers. He's convinced, nay possessed, of the notion that a rigged television quiz show in the early 1950s ended our dreams of purity and justice and that we've been going straight downhill ever since. Mr. Redford thinks the 1950s was a rotten decade. I do not. Mr. Redford thinks that before the unspeakable quiz-show scandal we were innocent. Before the scandal was the age of innocence.

If not for that darn crooked quiz show, which dashed to earth all this country's ideals, would we be sending an army of 15,000 men to occupy Haiti? How about Woodrow Wilson? I assume Mr. Christopher and Mr. Talbott are idealistic Wilsonians. But in 1915 President Wilson sent the U.S. Marines into Haiti. In 1916 he sent General Pershing on a "punitive expedition" into Mexico.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt, then Wilson's assistant secretary of the Navy, generously wrote a Constitution for the benighted Haitians, they rose in revolt under the leadership of a man named Perrault (pronounced "Perot"). Wilson resolved this little hitch by sending two Marines to infiltrate the Haitian rebels' defensive perimeter and assassinate Perrault. He gave both Marines the Congressional Medal of Honor. It was an innocent assassination.

Now "The Age of Innocence" is a phrase coined by a great American novelist (and no feminist), Edith Wharton. But for Edith Wharton the "age of innocence"

was the 1870s, the decade immediately after our Civil War. For her the country had been going to the dogs ever since, but her phrase, "age of innocence," has been revived again and again, applied to one decade after another, always referring to what the commentator considers a simpler and more idealistic period, an age untouched by the knowledge of evil. Look "innocence" up in any dictionary. That's what it means.

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I disagree with Edith Wharton, as the post-Civil War period in America knew evil and plenty of it. But Robert Redford's age of innocence is the goofiest yet, and I can only wonder if Mr. Christopher and Mr. Talbott are simple-enough souls to buy his line. It's quite preposterous that a nation that fought a war to the death with Adolf Hitler, bombed Hiroshima, resisted the ominous Soviet advance into Central Europe, only to be sent reeling by massive assaults by North Korea and then People's China, should be unacquainted with evil. In the 1940s black people in America still lived under the iron heel of Jim Crow. The military was still rigidly segregated.

An aspiring actor in the early 1970s, with the theatrical profession's customary egocentricity, Mr. Redford apparently never gave a thought to these other incidental evils, from Auschwitz to black lynchings in the South. To his naive mind the discovery of a rigged television quiz show was our first encounter with Satan.

But why is the ethical judgment of a dim artistic person like Robert Redford of any importance? Simply because more people will see his movie, or imbibe its wisdom indirectly through his fellow entertainers in television news, or even through that great pop movie fan

Bill Clinton, than will ever read the seven-point accord signed last week in Port-au-Prince.

I shall now unfurl my true colors. Robert Redford is far more trivial than Edith Wharton, but anyone and everyone who imagines that an earlier age was "innocent" is misguided and foolish. What these people are talking about is what they perceive as the breakdown of a social order (Edith Wharton) or the breakdown of a moral code.

America in the 1870s, 1890s, 1940s, or for that matter the 1950s, was by no means "innocent." Children might have heard about sex at a somewhat later age (although let everyone speak for himself), but America knew perfectly well that there was such a thing as evil. William Faulkner's moral code was different from Ernest Hemingway's, but they were both sustained by strong ethical systems.

Indeed, it's not that we have no ethical system even today. Although unpopular with large numbers of ordinary citizens, the prevailing system is simply new, generated by an often agnostic elite. Whether the new ethics sustain us is another matter. To adapt the English language's most celebrated speech on mercy — Portia's in Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" — the quality of mercy has become strained.

Our ancestors believed in good and evil, and that evil should be punished. Superior people today, by contrast, don't really believe in evil and consequently shrink in horror from punishment. They put their faith in compassion, rehabilitation and therapy, usurping the exercise of divine mercy for themselves — and on an unprecedented scale. Whether this compassionate system can sustain an entire society is open to doubt. Innocence, a child-like quality about which I'm highly skeptical when applied to adults, is sharply distinguished from the derogatory "naivete," defined as "deficiency in worldly wisdom or informed judgment."

Naivete still thrives today in such as ex-President Carter. How Jimmy Carter can have been president of the United States, complained plaintively that Moscow "lied" to him, and yet invite Haiti's General Cedras to teach Sunday school in Plains, Georgia, while insisting that single-handed he could have avoided the invasions of Grenada, Panama, and the entire Gulf War, is one for the book.

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